

Washington Jewish Week

'Voice of Anne Frank' speaks through mime and dance, words and movements *Review*

NOVEMBER 10, 2015 BY LISA TRAIGER — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Anne Frank has been lauded as a martyr, a literary savant and a saint-like figure in the wake of the Holocaust.

But she was a mere girl who kept a remarkable diary during extraordinary times. That we know her life, her thoughts, her moods, hopes and dreams is only because of her solitary writing of the diary over the two years her family — father, mother and older sister Margot — hid in the attic of a secret warehouse in the heart of Amsterdam. Behind a cupboard of shelves, the Franks, joined by other Jews, retreated as the Nazis overtook the Netherlands.

The German-born teenager has become a symbol of untarnished hope in the face of incomprehensible adversity. Her diary, discovered after the war and published in 1947, has been translated into 67 languages and is widely read. The diary has inspired plays, films, books, and other artistic expressions. And she has become a popular icon of tolerance for young people across races, religions, nationalities and political stances. Anne Frank's voice does, indeed

But like her many young fans, she was also just a girl, struggling with adolescent problems, disagreeing with her mother, bickering with her sister, falling in love with the boy next door, and cutting out magazine pictures of Hollywood stars.

It's this Anne Frank, the giggly, chatty child who turns into a sometimes sarcastic, someti

thoughtful teen, that Czech performer Mirenka Cechova reveals in her one-woman theatrical production, *The Voice of Anne Frank*, which was presented at the Atlas Performing Arts Center at Lang Theater last Saturday. The play made its Washington debut in 2011 and has since been widely performed and lauded around the world.

In the darkened theater, first we hear the whispers and giggles of a girl; cellist Nancy Jo Snider, perched atop a high platform, responds note by note in the dim light. Anne is conversing with her diary, Kitty, the name she gave to her diary when she received it just a month before her family went into hiding. Confiding in the diary, we see her arched wrist traverse the space, writing her story. Snider answers in music and the interplay between performer and musician becomes a dynamic conversation.

Cechova's bare back underscores her chatter — ribs and shoulder blades undulating, arms and wrists entwining and punctuating voice and music. The bare skin of Cechova's back is the performer's characterizations of her family: beloved Pim, her father; Mum, with whom she often butts heads; her older sister Margot, along with the high-strung Mrs. van Daan, glutted with Mr. van Daan and Anne's first love, the couple's son, Peter. Cechova transforms herself with a few movements — the cock of her head, the setting of her shoulder, a flutter of fingers across a trembling forearm.

With few props — a valise, a swath of white fabric — and her agile hands and fingers, Cechova invents character and conversation, imitating the shrill voice of Mrs. van Daan and the huff of Mr. van Daan. With a single sleeved arm, she captures an intimate moment with Peter — a caress and a kiss. And then there's a little ballet sequence, danced against the back wall. Cechova's arms undulate. Then, they erupt in a tremor, hummingbird-like, before they fold away like a butterfly expanding and then contracting its wings. It's a lovely moment drawing on her training in ballet and in mime and physical theater.

Cechova told Washington Jewish Week in 2011 that she, like many, first encountered *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a 13-year-old and said “remembered a kind of feeling ... something resonated with me in the diary.”

She selected snippets of Frank's writing for her spoken passages in the 50-minute piece. Her silences were equally effective, adding depth of character to the physical approach Cechova brought on stage.

The piece ends in darkness. There's no need for Cechova to go beyond the Secret Annex to the reality of the concentration camp. We know how the story ends. Snider, with a recorded cello sound, amplifies and accelerates time. In the pitch black, nothing more needs to be said.

Anne's voice has been silenced. But her story lives on. Her diary has been an inspiration for generations of students and artists. And, while Anne remains a Jewish heroine, her story — its creed of acceptance and tolerance — has become one of universal import.

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